

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor,

In the July 2000 issue of the *Journal* John Randall presented substantial evidence to suggest that Harry Price has been unfairly treated by the SPR and that he deserves greater historical recognition for his contributions to psychical research. This rebuttal of the various accusations of suspect or even fraudulent practices does however omit one major case which might be considered as yet unexplained or even suspicious. This is the Rosalie case; the apparent materialisation of a young girl at a séance under such conditions that Price seemed to be even prepared to consider the case as genuine. Such contemporaries of Price as Trevor Hall, Eric Dingwall, R. G. Medhurst, and Kathleen Goldney later all went to great lengths to try and locate the house from the clues Price gave and from the name of the family found amongst Price's papers. The failure of these searches added to suspicions that the case was imaginary. However I know from private conversation with John Randall that the case was eventually resolved, the family identified and Price found to be the victim rather than the perpetrator of a fraud. It would be good if John Randall could put the record straight by presenting the details of this, since it must now be the only obstacle preventing a more positive re-evaluation of Price.

*Department of Psychology
University of Gothenburg
Göteborg, SWEDEN*

ADRIAN PARKER

John Randall replies:

I am grateful to Dr Parker for his comments. I cannot now remember what I said during our conversation, but the facts of the 'Rosalie' case, as I understand them, are as follows:

Only one séance was involved, and this took place on Wednesday, December 15th, 1937, at a house in south London. The sitters were a Mr and Mrs X, their daughter Miss X (described as "aged nearly seventeen"), a young man called Jim (introduced as Miss X's boyfriend), Harry Price, and Madame Z, a lady of French origin whose deceased daughter, Rosalie, was supposed to have appeared at several previous séances. Price was allowed complete freedom to search the house, including the séance-room, and to take any precautions he thought fit. After a very thorough search he sealed the room completely, including the chimney, and sprinkled starch powder around the perimeter to catch the footprints of any potential intruders.

In the course of the séance which followed, 'Rosalie' apparently materialised in the form of a naked child, "aged about six years" (Price, 1939). Price was able to touch the figure and examine it visually by the light of two luminous plaques. It was, he said, the form of "a beautiful child which would have graced any nursery in the land". When 'Rosalie' had gone and the lights were turned up, Price found all his seals intact and no sign of any disturbance of the starch

powder. Mystified, he returned to his London club and wrote a full account of the experience within two hours of the termination of the séance.

Several of Price's close associates testified as to his state of mind following the 'Rosalie' séance. Mrs. Goldney said that he was "deeply disturbed, almost distraught . . . shaken to the core by his experience" (Tabori, 1974, p.232). Richard Lambert, former editor of *The Listener*, found him "completely baffled and frustrated". The experience, said Lambert, confronted Price with a hopeless dilemma: "Either he, the archsceptic, must admit he had been taken in by an obvious fraud; or he, the archsceptic, must eat the words he had spoken so often and emphatically in his career against 'spiritism'. Price was unwilling to do either, and therefore turned his back as soon as possible on the whole unpalatable episode and tried to forget it." (Lambert, 1960).

After Price's death Dingwall and Hall, with their usual propensity for making wild and derogatory assertions about the motives and activities of deceased psychical researchers, suggested that the 'Rosalie' séance never took place at all. Price, they thought, had made up the entire story in order to have a sensational chapter for his book *Fifty Years of Psychical Research* (Dingwall & Hall, 1958). In fact, the correspondence between Price and his publisher shows that he was very reluctant to publish the story at all, and only did so after some persuasion. He had wanted to hold further séances, bringing in other observers (such as Lambert) but he had not been allowed to do so. In his 1939 account he quite specifically stated that he did *not*, as yet, accept the materialisation at its face value, and compared his experience unfavourably with "the classic experiments of Sir William Crookes with the medium Florrie Cook" (p.130). In his autobiography he made a further brief mention of the case, adding: "I was not—and still am not—entirely satisfied with the phenomenon, striking as it was. I was persuaded to publish the report against my inclination, as the 'case' was incomplete and full investigation was unwelcome and difficult." (Price, 1942, p.293).

Dingwall and Hall's dismissal of the 'Rosalie' story was made on the basis of their own failure to locate the house in which the séance had been held (Price had suppressed the details in deference to the wishes of his hosts). A few years later several leading members of the SPR, including R. G. Medhurst, Mollie Goldney and Mary Rose Barrington, attacked the problem (Medhurst, 1965). They soon located a carbon copy of a letter from Price to the owner of the property, confirming the visit. This letter effectively demolished the theory of Dingwall and Hall, who had failed to notice it in the archive at London University. At the top of the letter was typed the name "Mrs. 'Montgomery'" (*not the real name*), so the SPR team set out to examine the houses of all the 'Montgomerys' listed in the telephone directory for the greater London area during 1937. They found no house or family which completely fitted the description given by Price, but the nearest match was a family of 'Montgomerys' who had lived at a house in Wickham Road, Brockley. However, the surviving members of this family denied any connection with the 'Rosalie' séance. Meanwhile David Cohen, President of the Manchester SPR, published his own book on the case, including much of the correspondence from the Harry Price archives (Cohen, 1965).

Then came an astonishing development. In his book Mr Cohen had appealed

for anyone with relevant information to come forward and as a result he received an anonymous letter from a woman who claimed that she was 'Miss X', the daughter of the couple in whose house the séance was held. The handwritten letter was signed "Rosalie" and simply headed "London, April 1966". It was passed to Paul Tabori, who published it in full in one of his later books (Tabori & Raphael, 1971). The letter runs to twelve pages of print.

Writing in this *Journal*, Andrew MacKenzie dismissed the letter rather abruptly on the grounds of its anonymity, saying that "there is not enough evidence here on which to form a firm opinion about the case" (MacKenzie, 1971). However, to me the letter is totally convincing. It provides a clear motive for the fraud, a detailed description of how it was accomplished, and a sound reason for the continuing anonymity. The girl's father, 'Mr X', had taken money from the wealthy French woman, 'Madame Z', ostensibly to invest it for her but in reality to cover up a fraud which he had perpetrated against his own firm. Madame Z had become suspicious, and in order to divert her attention and prevent her from asking for the return of her money she had been invited to a series of fake séances in which the daughter of the house, then aged eleven (*not*, as told to Price, "almost seventeen"), impersonated the French woman's deceased child.

The deception continued, on and off, for about a year. Then one day 'Rosalie' gave the wrong answer to a question, and Madame Z's suspicions were aroused. To pacify her, the Xs offered to hold a séance under test conditions in the presence of the most famous psychical researcher of the day, Harry Price. For this occasion Miss X was given high-heeled shoes, a padded bust-bodice and a new hair-do making her look much older than her years. She was introduced as the teenage daughter of Mr and Mrs X, and Mr X's younger brother, Jim, was introduced as her boyfriend. After Price had sealed the room and the lights had been turned out, Miss X quickly slipped from her seat to a corner of the room where she undressed before returning to the circle to impersonate 'Rosalie'. The most difficult part of this performance was the replacement of the clothing and padding before resuming her place among the sitters, but this had been carefully rehearsed beforehand, enabling her to dress quickly in the dark. I do not find it at all difficult to believe that with suitable make-up an eleven-year-old girl could impersonate a sixteen-year-old; nor do I find it difficult to believe that, under the poor observational conditions of the séance, the same girl could look like a six-year-old. In fact, Price noted in his report that she "looked older than her alleged years", but he does not seem to have realised the implications of his observation.

I have studied the 'Rosalie' letter carefully, comparing it with Price's account and with other relevant material. I can find no discrepancies or anachronisms; the letter appears to be genuine. In view of her father's disreputable behaviour, it is understandable that Miss X would not want his name known, even after his death. Various snippets of information point to Brockley as the location of the house, and it would not surprise me if the 'Montgomery' family interviewed by the SPR investigators turned out to be the true participants after all. In the circumstances their denial and attempt to disguise the true facts would be expected. It may well have been the nearness of the SPR investigation which provoked 'Miss X' into writing her letter, in an attempt to deter further probing.

In any event, a full explanation of the 'Rosalie' séance now exists, and there is no need to consider any paranormal explanations. It is clear that Harry Price acted honourably towards the family and did his best to conduct a proper scientific investigation, given the constraints within which he had to work. The fact that he was a sceptic and an experienced conjurer (Price was a member of the Magic Circle and a Vice-President of the Magicians' Club) did not prevent him from being hoodwinked, something which should be borne in mind when magicians are invoked as authorities in the matter of deception. It should also be borne in mind that speculative scepticism of the type indulged in by Dingwall and Hall may be very wide of the mark, and needs to be assessed at least as critically as the assertions of 'believers'.

6 Blandford Road
Leamington Spa
Warwickshire CV32 6BH

JOHN L. RANDALL

REFERENCES

- Cohen, D. (1965) *Price and his Spirit Child 'Rosalie'*. London: Regency Press.
Dingwall, E. J. and Hall, T. H. (1958) *Four Modern Ghosts*. London: Duckworth.
Lambert, R. S. (1960) Letter to the Editor. *IJP* 2 (2), 110-113.
MacKenzie, A. (1971) Book review. *JSPR* 46, 193-195.
Medhurst, R. G. (1965) Harry Price and 'Rosalie'. *JSPR* 43, 201-209.
Price, H. (1939) *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*. London: Longmans.
Price, H. (1942) *Search for Truth*. London: Collins.
Tabori, P. (1974) *Harry Price, Ghost-Hunter*. London: Sphere Books.
Tabori, P. and Raphael, P. (1971) *Beyond the Senses*. London: Souvenir Press.

To the Editor,

I was amused to notice that in their article on the Indian Rope Trick (July issue) Lamont and Wiseman, suffering perhaps from some collective illusion of memory, attribute R. T. Gould's excellent little book, *The Stargazer Talks* (1943), to one R. T. Gauld.

Braeside, Park Avenue
Plumtree Park, Keyworth
Nottingham NG12 5LU

ALAN GAULD